



NEWSLETTER

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY



HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO ALL OUR PARTNERS

It's that time of the year when we are busy decking the halls, shopping, wrapping presents, writing cards and letters, and baking homemade goodies.

South Dakota has a proud history of military heroes, and as we approach the holiday season, let us not forget the service to this country that has spanned the generations. Let us not forget the families of current and past soldiers, as they also endured a great deal while loved ones were deployed.

We wish you and your family a blessed holiday season and a new year of peace and happiness. Please keep our heroes, past and present in your hearts. God bless our veterans, their families, and our troops that are currently serving in harm's way.

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VA ANNOUNCES INITIAL PLANS FOR COVID-19 VACCINE DISTRIBUTION

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced a preliminary plan for distributing COVID-19 vaccinations it will implement once the Food and Drug Administration issues an emergency use authorization for a vaccine.

The VA has worked in close coordination with the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Operation Warp Speed to plan for COVID-19 vaccination of VA staff and veterans.

The VA will first provide vaccinations to front-line VA health care workers and veterans residing in long-term care units in 37 of its medical centers across the country.

The centers, listed on the next page, were chosen for their ability to vaccinate large numbers of people and store the vaccines at extremely cold temperatures.



Health care workers will be among the first to receive vaccinations because they are at high risk for contracting and spreading COVID-19 to other staff members and patients, and their health is critical to ensuring the continued care of veterans.

Veterans in VA's long-term care facilities will be the first patient group to be vaccinated. As vaccine supplies increase, additional veterans will receive vaccinations based on factors such as age, existing health problems and other considerations that increase the risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19.

The VA anticipates a limited vaccine supply immediately after FDA's approval, but expects more supplies to be available in short order.

"The VA is well prepared and positioned to begin COVID-19 vaccinations," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "Our ultimate goal is to offer it to all veterans and employees who want to be vaccinated."

The 37 VA sites chosen for initial distribution of the vaccine will closely monitor patients and staff for side effects and log this information in its vaccine monitoring and tracking system. This is the same system the VA uses to monitor reactions to all vaccines, including those for the flu and shingles.

The VA will report directly to the CDC data on all vaccine doses administered by the VA. The department will also provide general, public updates on the number of people who receive the vaccination at these sites, similar to how VA posts COVID-19 testing figures.

(continued on next page)

The 37 VA sites that have been selected include:

- Birmingham (AL) VA Health Care System
- Phoenix (AZ) VA Health Care System
- West Los Angeles (CA) VA Health Care System
- Palo Alto (CA) VA Health Care System
- Eastern Colorado (CO) VA Health Care System
- Connecticut (West Haven Campus) VA Health Care System
- Washington DC VA Health Care System
- Orlando (FL) VA Health Care System
- Augusta (GA) VA Health Care System
- Edward J. Hines Jr. VA Hospital (IL)
- Lexington (KY) VA Health Care System
- Southeast Louisiana (New Orleans) VA Health Care System
- Maryland (Baltimore) VA Health Care System
- Bedford (MA) VA Health Care System
- Ann Arbor (MI) VA Health Care System
- Minneapolis (MN) VA Health Care System
- Harry S Truman Memorial Veterans Hospital (Columbia MO)
- St. Louis (MO) VA Health Care System
- Omaha (NE) VA Health Care System
- Southern Nevada (North Las Vegas) VA Health Care System
- Raymond G. Murphy (NM) VA Health Care System
- New York Harbor (Brooklyn) VA Health Care System
- Western New York (Buffalo) VA Health Care System
- Durham (NC) VA Health Care System
- Cleveland (OH) VA Health Care System
- Oklahoma City (OK) VA Health Care System
- Portland (OR) VA Health Care System
- Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center (Philadelphia PA)
- Pittsburgh (PA) VA Health Care System
- Caribbean (Puerto Rico) VA Health Care System
- Memphis (TN) VA Health Care System
- Dallas (TX) VA Medical Center
- Michael E. DeBakey VA Health Care System (Houston TX)
- Audie L. Murphy VA Hospital (San Antonio TX)
- Richmond (VA) VA Health Care System
- Puget Sound (WA) VA Health Care System
- Milwaukee (WI) VA Health Care System

Veterans seeking additional information should visit the [VA Coronavirus Vaccine FAQs webpage](#), contact their care team, or visit their facility website.

ELVES SPREADING CHEER AT STATE VETERANS HOME



Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home Staff are not allowing the Grinch to ruin the holidays at the Home. Staff members have ensured all neighborhoods are festively decorated and there are treats galore for our residents.

Partners throughout the state, although not being able to visit the veterans, are still delivering care packages, treats, presents, and gift cards for our heroes.

Hot Springs Elks Lodge supplied candy bars for the residents. South Dakota National Guard soldiers and their families delivered gifts.

Elves from Pierre Elks Lodge 1953 delivered gifts

and treats for residents at the State Veterans Home and the VA Black Hills Health Care Center in Hot Springs totaling over \$26,000. Their gifting included presents and treats for the residents, but also many items for use in the Home's neighborhood kitchens and living rooms.



Custer VFW Auxiliary

members delivered gift cards for the residents to use at the Home's Mini Mart. In addition they provided items for the households and candy cane sleighs.

Sincere thanks to all our partners who take time out of their busy holiday schedules to bring the spirit of Christmas to our heroes!



VA LAUNCHES SINGLE ACCESS POINT TO ALL VA CONTACT CENTERS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced, the formal launch of 1-800-MyVA411 (1-800-698-2411), a single access point to all VA contact centers.

The number is available 24 hours-a-day, 365 days-a-year to serve veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

Responding to veteran feedback on the challenges of knowing the right number for VA assistance, 1-800-MyVA411, serves all members of the veteran community seeking information or help. Veterans and their families can still reach the Veterans Crisis Line directly at 1-800-273-8255 and pressing 1, by [Chat](#) or by texting 838255. The White House VA Hotline is also still available at 1-855-948-2311 for veterans and their families to share compliments and concerns.

“1-800-MyVA411 is always the right number to reach the VA and is a great example of the department’s customer service strategy in action,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “1-800-MyVA411 provides easy access to specialized contact centers as well as an option to immediately talk to a live agent.”

When dialing 1-800-MyVA411, callers have the option of pressing 0 to be immediately connected with a customer service agent to answer questions or provide a warm-handoff to the appropriate VA expert.

During the pilot phase from Oct. 1, 2019–Sep. 31, 2020, 1-800-MyVA411 connected more than 1.3 million callers with VA contact centers and experts.

1-800-MyVA411 provides information on:

- COVID-19 updates.
- Health care eligibility and enrollment.
- VA benefits, such as disability, compensation and pension, education programs, caregiver support, insurance, home loans, and burial headstones and markers among others.
- The nearest VA medical centers, benefits offices or cemeteries to veterans, VA Medical Center operational updates and connection to VA Medical Center operators.
- Directory assistance and technical support for www.VA.gov.
- Debt and payment options.

For more information contact the [Veterans Experience Office](#) at Vets-Experience@VA.gov.

VA COLMERY ACT IT IMPLEMENTATION COMPLETE

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Office of Information and Technology (OIT) successfully completed all Information Technology (IT) updates to process education benefits for veterans.

The updates were completed Oct. 31 in accordance with the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, also referred to as the Forever GI Bill, which included 31 GI Bill®-related provisions that expanded and enhanced opportunities for veterans using the GI Bill® in pursuit of their educational and career goals.

“These IT changes improve our ability to deliver education benefits to GI Bill® students.” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “As the VA works to modernize processes, this milestone is an important step in our digital transformation journey — merging people, procedures and technology.”

Since 2018, the VA has ensured veterans realized the impact of these provisions — including restoration of entitlement, removal of the delimiting date to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill®, and full benefits to eligible Purple Heart recipients — while implementing these changes within its IT systems.

The implementation of the Colmery Act has been a joint undertaking with VBA, OIT, MITRE Corporation, and Accenture Federal Services. Working together as an integrated unit, the team delivered comprehensive software development, integration, testing, communications, and training to meet immediate needs.

The “go-live” of Colmery Act IT updates ultimately changes the way VBA interfaces with veterans. The integrated solution allows the VA to better serve veterans in pursuit of their education and career goals through improved processing times, rapid response to legislation, and fewer manual work arounds.

The team utilized an innovative Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) to collaborate across multiple systems and VA offices, resulting in improved engagement, quality, and efficiency. Despite transitioning to a virtual work environment in March, the team adapted quickly and continued to meet the mission leveraging the SAFe approach.

The following updates represent important benefits changes for GI Bill® students, as the Colmery Act expands opportunities under the Post-9/11 GI Bill®.

- Removed the expiration of benefits for those who served on or after Jan.1, 2013.
- Changed the way Post-9/11 GI Bill [Monthly Housing Allowance is calculated](#).
- Expanded [Yellow Ribbon Program eligibility](#) to include Purple Heart recipients.
- Established the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship and improved the [attendance verification process](#) for scholarship recipients.
- [Proration of the entitlement](#) charge for licensing, certifications, and national exams.



HOW DOES A VETERAN GAIN FREE ENTRANCE TO A NATIONAL PARK?

In order to gain free entrance to national parks that charge an entrance fee, a veteran will need to present one of the following forms of identification where entrance fees are collected:

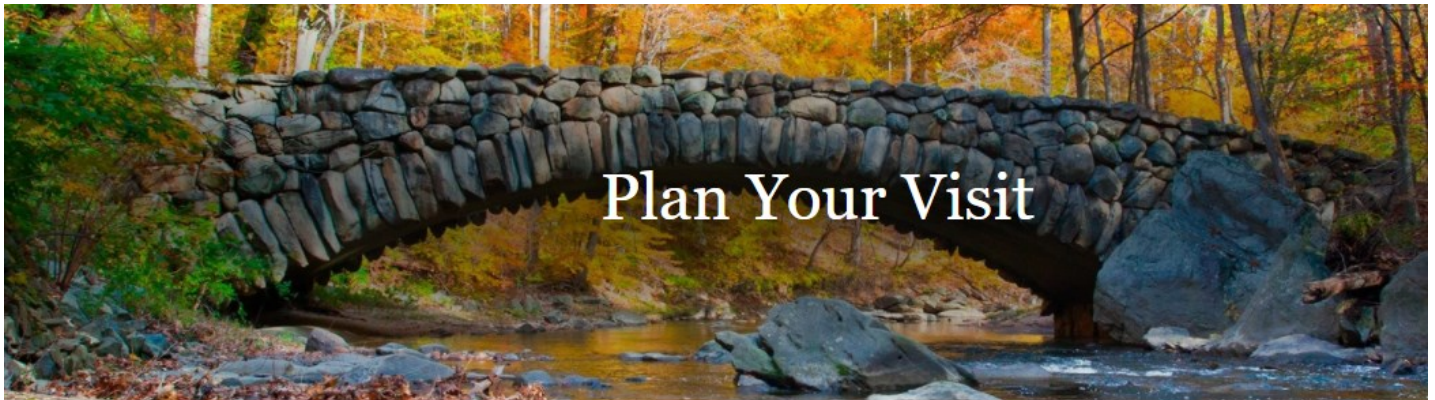
- Department of Defense Identification Card (CAC Card)
- Veteran Health Identification Card (VHIC)
- Veteran ID Card
- Veterans designation on a state-issued U.S. driver's license or identification card.

For those that are disabled/service connected, they can still obtain the Access Pass by either applying online or visiting any National Park where an entrance fee is required.

Current serving members can also obtain Military Pass through the America the Beautiful Pass Program.

For more information, visit:

<https://www.nps.gov/planyourvisit/veterans-and-gold-star-families-free-access.htm>



Free Entrance to National Parks for Veterans and Gold Star Families

VA ANNOUNCES JOINT FINAL RULE ON EQUAL TREATMENT OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced a joint final rule with eight other agencies — the Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Labor, the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Agriculture and the Agency for International Development — to implement President Trump’s May 3, 2018, [Executive Order No. 13831](#), on the Establishment of a White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative.

This rule ensures religious and non-religious organizations are treated equally in VA-supported programs, and it clarifies that religious organizations do not lose their legal protections and rights just because they participate in federal programs and activities.

“VA partners with hundreds of groups across the country that are looking to support our veterans,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “Making it harder for faith-based groups to deliver this support never made sense, and this joint rule will remove unfair obstacles they have faced for years and unleash their power to do good for veterans across the nation.”

The final rule ensures equal treatment for faith-based organizations, consistent with the Constitution and other federal law. It removes requirements in prior regulations that placed unequal burdens on religious organizations, cast unwarranted suspicion on them, and were in tension with their religious liberty rights.

The final rule also clarifies that religious organizations do not lose various legal protections because they participate in federal programs and activities, such as the rights to accommodations and conscience protections under the First Amendment, Religious Freedom Restoration Act, and other federal laws.

The rule preserves most of the existing regulations governing participation of religious organizations in the VA’s financial assistance programs, including provisions barring providers from discriminating against beneficiaries based on religion and requiring that any religious activities by the organization be separated in time or location from any services directly funded with federal money.

This rule was drafted in response to Executive Order 13831, issued in May 2018. The Agencies worked collaboratively to draft notices of proposed rulemaking that were published or delivered to Congress in January 2020. The nine agencies then received over 95,000 public comments from a range of interested parties, including Members of Congress; state and local governments, agencies, and officials; faith-based services providers and umbrella organizations; advocacy organizations; and individuals. The Agencies considered those comments, modified their regulations to address concerns raised in the comments, and drafted responses included in the final rule.

AT&T ADDED TO VA VIDEO CONNECT TELE-HEALTH PROGRAM

Veterans using the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) VA Video Connect app on their mobile phones through AT&T's cellular network will no longer incur data charges when using this video telehealth technology to connect and meet with their VA health care providers and teams.

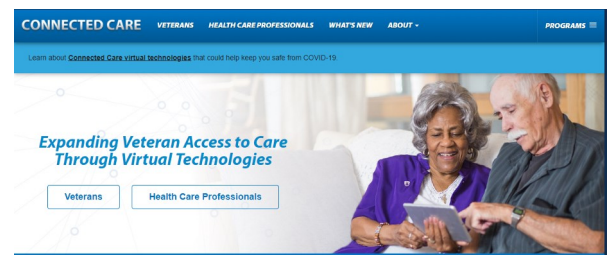
AT&T joins T-Mobile, TracFone by Safelink, and Verizon in supporting veterans' ability to video conference with their VA care providers on their smartphone, tablet, or computer from any location with an internet connection.

"More veterans are increasingly utilizing VA telehealth services," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "The VA and AT&T are working together to ensure health care continues to be accessible and convenient for veterans regardless of where they live."

The agreement between VA and AT&T was facilitated by the VA Secretary's Center for Strategic Partnerships and is part of the VA's Anywhere to Anywhere initiative ensuring veterans have the best telehealth experience.

In fiscal year 2020, veterans attended more than 3.8 million video telehealth appointments from their homes, representing an increase of more than 1200% when compared to fiscal year 2019.

For more information on VA's telehealth services, visit connectedcare.va.gov.



OPSAL AND SCHLECHT RECOGNIZED BY SDDVA

This week, SDDVA Secretary Greg Whitlock presented SDDVA's "Outreach Partner of the Year" award to Geri Opsal, tribal veterans service officer for Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate.

Opsal was recognized for her outstanding outreach programs and her commitment to reaching out to veterans.

Whitlock also presented SDDVA's "Support Staff of the Year" award to Kathy Schlecht at Brown County.

Typically, the award is presented at SDDVA's annual training conference in August. However, Geri and Kathy were unable to attend the conference this year due to work and family medical issues.

Congratulations Geri and Kathy and thank you for all that you do for our veterans.



SYMPATHIES FOR THE JAMERSON FAMILY

SDDVA has learned of the passing of Kevin J. Jamerson, office manager for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Department of Veterans Affairs.

Kevin made his journey on Friday morning December 4, 2020, at Sanford Fargo. Kevin was a multifaceted asset to SRST Department of Veterans Affairs and had a hand in all of its accomplishments. His service to his family, his community, his tribe, his veterans and the US Navy will forever be remembered and appreciated. Kevin served in the U.S. Navy from 1987 through 1994.

Please keep his wife Tootie and his family in your prayers.



2021 SOUTH DAKOTA LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The 96th Session of the South Dakota Legislature will convene at approximately 1:00 pm on Tuesday, January 12, 2022, with Governor Noem's State of the State Address. This year's session is scheduled for 37 legislative days, with the main run concluding March 11. March 29 is reserved for considering gubernatorial vetoes.

Legislative Research Council's website can be viewed at:
<https://sdlegislature.gov/#/>.

Legislative bills can be viewed at:
<https://sdlegislature.gov/#/Session/Bills/44>.

The legislative calendar can be found on the next page or at:
<https://mylrc.sdlegislature.gov/api/Documents/171855.pdf>.

There are 105 legislators—35 in the Senate and 70 in the House of Representatives.



96th SOUTH DAKOTA LEGISLATIVE SESSION CALENDAR

2021 ♦ 37 Legislative Days



Please refer to the Joint Rules, Chapter 17 for complete information.

	Sun	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Sat
January 2021						1	2
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	10	11	12 Session Opens 12 Noon (CST) <i>State of the State</i> L.D. 1	13 <i>State of the Judiciary</i> L.D. 2	14 <i>State of the Tribes</i> L.D. 3	15 L.D. 4	16
	17	18 <i>Martin Luther King Jr. Day</i>	19 Executive orders filed (Constitution, Art. IV, Sec. 8) L.D. 5	20 L.D. 6	21 <i>Jt. Memorial Service</i> 3:00pm L.D. 7	22 Concurrent/House/Senate Resolutions limited introduction deadline (J.R. 6B-3) L.D. 8	23
	24	25 L.D. 9	26 Bill draft requests submitted to LRC by 5:00pm (for unlimited introduction) L.D. 10	27 L.D. 11	28 Last day for unlimited bill & joint resolution introduction (J.R. 6B-3) (TWO HOURS prior to session) L.D. 12	29	30
February 2021	31	1 All bill draft requests submitted to LRC by 5:00pm L.D. 13	2 Committee bill and joint resolution requests due to LRC by 5:00pm L.D. 14	3 Last day for introduction of individual bills and joint resolutions (TWO HOURS prior to session) L.D. 15	4 Last day for introduction of committee bills and joint resolutions (TWO HOURS prior to session) L.D. 16	5 L.D. 17	6
	7	8 L.D. 18	9 L.D. 19	10 L.D. 20	11 Last day for JCA selection of general fund revenue targets (J.R. 7-11.1) L.D. 21	12	13
	14	15 <i>Presidents' Day</i> L.D. 22	16 L.D. 23	17 L.D. 24	18 L.D. 25	19	20
	21	22 L.D. 26	23 Concurrent resolution requests due to LRC by 5:00pm, and Last day to use J.R. 5-17 L.D. 27	24 Last day to move required delivery of bills or resolutions by a committee to the house of origin L.D. 28	25 Last day to pass bills or joint resolutions by the house of origin (Crossover Day), AND Last day for final introduction of Concurrent/House/ Senate resolutions L.D. 29	26	27
	28	1 L.D. 30	2 Last day for JCA to move required delivery of special appropriation bills to house of origin (J.R. 17-1) L.D. 31	3 Last day for house of origin to pass special appropriation bills (J.R. 17-1), and J.R. 5-13 in effect L.D. 32	4 Last day to move required delivery of bills or joint resolutions by a committee to the second house, AND Last day for introduction of commemorations L.D. 33	5	6
March 2021	7	8 Last day for a bill or joint resolution to pass both houses L.D. 34	9 L.D. 35	10 L.D. 36	11 L.D. 37	12	13
	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
	28	29 Reserved for consideration of gubernatorial vetoes L.D. 37	30	31	1	2	3

UPCOMING EVENTS

Dec 24-25—State Offices are closed

2021

Jan 1—State Offices are closed

Jan 12—Governor's State of the State Address—1:00 pm (CT)

Jan 13—SDDVA/SD Veterans Council Legislative Reception

Feb 19-21—American Legion Mid-Winter Conference—Oacoma

Apr 9-10—DAV State Convention—Rushmore Hotel and Suites—Rapid City

Aug 16-19—SDDVA Annual Benefits School—Ramkota Hotel—Pierre



Audry Ricketts, Public Information Officer

South Dakota Department of the Military <https://military.sd.gov/default.html>

South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs <https://vetaffairs.sd.gov>

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